Tells the Facts and Names the Names

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Charge of the Blue Light Brigade

Taking on Wal-Mart

BY JOANN WYPIJEWSKI

Even among its friends, few would say that the United Food and Commercial Workers is a radical powerhouse of a union. Yet alone among US labor organizations it has the honor of knowing that every day 2,000 people are warned of its cunning and muscle, of the threat it poses to individualism, free enterprise and the American way.

Those 2,000, on average, are the new recruits assembled daily for an eight-hour orientation preparatory to becoming Wal-Mart "associates". In addition to instruction in Sam Walton's life, philosophy and the Wal-Mart cheer ("Give me a W, Give me an A" and so on, including "Give me a Squiggly", accompanied by Sam's signature butt-shake), they are shown a videotape called "You've Picked a Great Place to Work". So great, in fact, that "unions have been targeting Wal-Mart for years". Without early innoculation and regular anti-union booster shots, it's implied, any worker might be open to contagion. Alan Peto is one of the stricken. A cashier at a Sam's Club, (a son-of-Walmart membership warehouse chain) in Las Vegas, Peto has become a major in-store supporter of the union organizing drive there. If it weren't for Wal-Mart's relentless alerts, he says, "I would not even have known to go to the UFCW".

Behind the speculative hocus pocus that came to symbolize the American economy in recent years, there was always the sturdier and less alluring reality of the service sector. Enron was supposed to have been the dynamo and the future; all the while those distinctions belonged to Wal-Mart. While the Houston energy giant puffed up, then collapsed, the Arkansas discount emporium was piling up a fortune the old-fashioned way: squeezing the lowest prices from suppliers, paying basement wages and flattening competitors by sheer scale.

When it releases its 2001 year-end figures on February 19, Wal-Mart is expected to leap to the Number 1 spot on the Fortune 500, with 1.2 million employees and revenues exceeding $220 billion, making it not only the biggest retailer but the biggest corporation in the world.

Wal-Mart's executives credit their success to low prices, customer satisfaction and respect for the individual. They point also to the company's listing on Fortune's annual poll of "100 best to work for", the result of a random national survey of employees. Wal-Mart's website boasts that the company is "the leading employer of people of color in the United States" and "one of the leading employers of senior citizens and the disabled".

Yet most Wal-Mart employees are moving on out, not up. When Barbara Ehrenreich went to work for $7 an hour at a Wal-Mart in Minneapolis for her book *Nickel and Dimed*, she did so to test whether the wage would cover living expenses and still allow her to pay rent after one month. It didn't, an experience that might partly explain why 700,000 new people churn through the company each year, representing an annual turnover rate of 70 percent.

Last December Wal-Mart agreed to pay $6.8 million to settle lawsuits in (**Wal-Mart** *continued on page 5)*

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Our Little Secrets

DynCorp Cometh: Omen for Venezuela?

The following contract was announced by the US Department of Defense on January 15: " DynCorp, Int., Fort Worth, Texas, is being awarded a $119,751,602 contract to provide for all personnel, equipment, tools, materials, supervision, and items and services as necessary to perform forward operating locations, base operating support services in support of the U.S. Southern Command's aerial counterdrug surveillance mission in Aruba, Curaçao, and Ecuador. At this time, $25,709,541 of the funds has been obligated. The period of this contract is January 15, 2002 through December 31, 2002. Solicitation was posted via the electronic posting system in May 2001, and there were three proposals received. Negotiations were completed December 2001. The contractor will perform this effort at various locations worldwide. The Air Combat Command Contracting Squadron, Langley Air Force Base, Va., is the contracting activity (F44650-02-C-0002)."

For more than 50 years DynCorp, based in Reston, Va., has been a worldwide force providing maintenance support to the U.S. military through contract field teams. As one of the federal government's top 25 contractors, DynCorp has received nearly $1 billion since 1995 for these services. Aruba, as CounterPunchers are no doubt aware, is off the northern coast of Colombia where the oil fields and most of Occidental's holdings are concentrated, nowhere near the southern department of Putumayo where the coca eradication operation is taking place. Curaçao, a colony of the Netherlands, is 35 miles off the coast of Venezuela, also far from the coca eradication operation. Venezuela has not yet been announced as a target of the anti-terrorist war, but its lack of accomodation to foreign oil corporations and its friendly relations with Cuba and Iraq , plus much recent internal tumult over the leadership of populist Torres has persuaded many that it is a ripe target for destabilization.

Earlier in January, the Colombian government announced its criminalization of the demilitarized zone assigned to the FARC and an all-out attack on the rebel insurgency.

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DynCorp and Sex Slaves

DynCorp, please note, is the former employer of Ben Johnston, a Texan who blew the whistle a bit more than a year ago on the behavior of some of his erstwhile colleagues. According to a detailed story by Kelly Patricia O'Meara in Insight magazine, a Racketeer Influenced Corrupt Organization Act (RICO) lawsuit has been filed in Texas on behalf of the former DynCorp aircraft-maintenance technician. He serviced Apache and Blackhawk helicopters for DynCorp in Bosnia, where the company has deployed 181 personnel during the last six years.

"In the latter part of 1999", O'Meara cites the suit as alleging, "Johnston learned that employees and supervisors from DynCorp were engaging in perverse, illegal and inhumane behavior [and] were purchasing illegal weapons, women, forged passports and [participating in] other immoral acts."

Johnston, the suit alleges, "witnessed coworkers and supervisors literally buying and selling women for their own personal enjoyment, and employees would brag about the various ages and talents of the individual slaves they had purchased."

According to O'Meara, "Rather than acknowledge and reward Johnston's effort to get this behavior stopped, DynCorp fired him, forcing him into protective custody by the U.S. Army Criminal Investigation Division (CID) until the investigators could get him safely out of Kosovo and returned to the United States."

Johnston told O'Meara that his "main problem was [sexual misbehavior] with the kids, but I wasn't too happy with them ripping off the government, either. DynCorp is just as immoral and elite as possible, and any rule they can break they do. There was this one guy who would hide parts so we would have to wait for parts and, when the military would question why it was taking so long, he'd pull out the part and say 'Hey, you need to install this.' They'd have us replace windows in helicopters that weren't bad just to get paid."

Johnston was appalled enough by the drunkenness and sloppy work, but the exploitation of local children and women was what put him over the edge. "I heard talk about the prostitution right away, but it took some time before I understood that they were buying these girls. I'd tell them that it was wrong and that it was no different than slavery, that you can't buy women. But they'd buy the women's passports and they [then] owned them and would sell them to each other."

"None of the girls," continues Johnston, "were from Bosnia. They were from Russia, Romania and other places, and they were imported in by DynCorp and the Serbian mafia. These guys would say 'I gotta go to Serbia this weekend to pick up three girls.' They talk about it and brag about how much they pay for them, usually between $600 and $800. In fact, there was this one guy who had to be 60 years old who had a girl who couldn't have been 14. DynCorp leadership was 100 percent in bed with the mafia over there. I didn't get any results from talking to DynCorp officials, so I went to Army CID and I drove around with them, pointing out everyone's houses who owned women and weapons."

O'Meara reports that "According to CID, which sought guidance from the Office of the Staff Judge Advocate in Bosnia, "under the Dayton Peace Accord, the contractors were protected from Bosnian law which did not apply to them. They knew of no [U.S.] federal laws that would apply to these individuals at this time."

However, CID took another look and, according to the investigation report, under

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Paragraph 5 of the NATO agreement between the Republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia regarding the status of NATO and its personnel, contractors "were not immune from local prosecution if the acts were committed outside the scope of their official duties".

The CID case was closed in June 2000 and turned over to the Bosnian authorities. DynCorp has denied all Johnston's allegations.

CHOMSKY TO TURKEY, HITCHENS TOO?

Now comes the news that Turkey's terrorism prosecutor is targeting Fatih Tas, the publishers of writings by Noam Chomsky. Chomsky is planning to fly to Turkey for the publisher's first court appearance on Feb. 13. He has already written to the offices of the United Nations high commissioner for human rights, pointing out that recent amendments to Turkish law were supposed to have provided greater freedom of expression, not less of it.

We assume that Christopher Hitchens, who has charged Chomsky with being a terror-symp, will be heading for Turkey to testify for the prosecution.

AUSTRALIAN REFUGEES: SEW OUR LIPS

Here's a dispatch from Australia by CounterPuncher Vanessa Jones, whom we last met when she gave a diverting account of being married to a Muslim and living in Melbourne.

Jan. 22: Tonight as I type this, after my own chidren are tucked up in bed, 64 locked up refugees have sewn their lips together at the Woomera Detention Centre in the arid, isolated Australian desert town of Woomera in South Australia, in protest at the time they've had to wait for the processing of their refugee applications. Another 202 detained refugees have been on a hunger strike, 18 have been treated for dehydration, and 6 have deliberately wounded themselves last night by swallowing shampoo and were rushed to hospital vomiting or unconscious. Three men apparently tried to commit suicide by hanging themselves with bed linen.

The media get access to the opinions of these families via their children (yes, one third of the detainees are kids, bused out daily to school) and the children cry, talking in broken English to the media before starting lessons.

The hunger strikers are Afghan, Iranian, Iraqi and Palestinian asylum seekers. Some refugees have been there, held in by caged wire in the blazing hot sun, for several months and are expected to wait probably another year for refugee processing outcomes. They're not criminals, but people simply applying for refugee status. Previously, frustrated detainees have set fire to and vandalized the Centre in desperation at the time taken in processing their visas. The Australian government, which recently got re-elected partly due to their treatment of asylum seekers, has chosen this time scale. (There is a South Australian election coming up.) Now they say the refugees are trying to elicit sympathy via their actions and that this will not speed up their processing.

Some people I speak with have the idea that Australia can't keep letting boat loads of people in. They say: It's us or them. Once we have arrived we cannot let anyone else in the door. It is for us alone and, basically, stuff anyone else who wants to enjoy it or contribute to it.

The artist David Wojnarowicz exhibited in New York in December 1990 at Exit Art gallery. The catalogue of the exhibition shows a photograph of possibly himself with his lips sewn together. A political comment, as were many of his paintings and prints, which reached the art world and beyond before his death from AIDS.

On the same soil as I stand typing this, 64 are trying to sleep, hungry and thirsty with their lips sewn together, and another 202 are on hunger strike, having already tried fire and vandalism to get their message across. Imagine sending your children off to school, out of a detention centre you yourself cannot leave, telling them what needs to be articulated, in all its politically gruesome nature, and helping them organize notes written in a foreign language (English) and encouraging graphic drawings (their form of documentation of the event, since the media have very limited and controlled inner access), and expecting them to say it to a crowd of journalists, things you'd normally screen your own kids from on TV, while you sit in a detention centre with your lips sewn together or on hunger strike. In the stinking hot sun in the heat of summer. Not a work of art but reality. Surely this is desperation.

Bonnie Sparrow, a former pediatric registrar at Woomera Detention Centre, has said, "I've never seen so many depressed and traumatised and disturbed children as I have in the 2 weeks that I just spent there. I saw a 16-year-old who attempted to hang himself. I saw a 14-year-old girl who cut her wrists. And I saw another 14-year-old boy who tried to choke himself...I've never been to a more miserable place."

For years Woomera was a test site for British weapons of mass destruction.

"I'd tell them that it was wrong and that it was no different than slavery—that you can't buy women. But they'd buy the women's passports and they [then] owned them and would sell them to each other."

WHAT DO YOU DO?

What do you do, that is, in the case of an Indian Point nuclear power plant evacuation if you don't have a car? Daniel Wolff, author of Change Gonna Come, *the best biography of the great Sam Cooke , sends us this memo on nukes, cars and class.*

Many residents of Westchester and Rockland closest to the nuclear power plant will hear the sirens, get in their cars, and do their best to escape the area. (For the moment, let's not discuss the likelihood of traffic jams.) But do our elected officials have plans for poorer residents who don't own vehicles? In the area around Indian Point, many of these families are black or brown and/or non-English speaking.

According to the "Planning for Emergency" booklet put out by Westchester, Rockland, Orange and Putnam counties in conjunction with the NY State Emergency Office and Con Edison, should there be "nuclear emergencies" at Indian Point that force an evacuation, your Emergency Alert radio station will let you know.

You should "remain calm", "ignore rumors" and gather "the items you would need for a three-day visit". Then, if you have a car, you should "close the windows and air vents ... until you have left the emergency area" and "offer a ride to anyone you know who may not have a car".

*(**OLS** continued on page 6)*

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Remember Taung-Min Lin, the Tipton Kangaroo Rat Killer?

Rep. Pombo: Too Dumb to be Dangerous

By Chris Clarke

In January 1997, a month of record flooding in California, I was touring the wetter parts of the Central Valley and Delta with a friend, when I saw something I thought would make a great photo. Problem was, I would have had to pull over onto I-5's narrow shoulder, in heavy traffic in fog, to take the shot. I decided not to risk our lives.

What I saw was a flooded field, with what looked like about five feet of water on it. In the middle of the field, about chin-deep in the flood, was a sign saying "This land available - Pombo Real Estate".

I thought of that sign this week as I read that Richard Pombo, Tracy Representative and scion of the real estate family, is one of several candidates for the chairmanship of the House Resources Committee.

Pombo is one of the shock troops of the 104th Congress, cut from essentially the same cloth as Don Young, Helen Chenoweth, Rush Limbaugh and Newt Gingrich. His family made its pile by helping farmers buy and sell land, usually to developers.

With Central Valley land being cut up, fenced off, plowed and paved the way it is, a huge percentage of its native species are in trouble, so the Endangered Species Act is going to be a major obstacle to those who would subdivide the last acre of what was once North America's Serengeti.

And sure enough, Pombo is a copper-lunged - if comically inept - opponent of the ESA, and any other federal intrusion into his family's God-given right to turn over real property. (Federal intrusion is fine, of course, in the form of the huge flood-control projects that allow the Pombos to turn historic floodplain into eight-acre ranchettes.) In an educated society, Pombo would be considered not much more than a buffoon. It's a truism to refer to politicians as liars. But it's hard to find a clumsier liar than Pombo.

In March 1997, Pombo attempted to pin the above-mentioned January flood in the Central Valley on the Endangered Species Act, charging that levee repair work had been delayed to protect the valley elderberry longhorned beetle. In fact the feds had long exempted disaster-related work from ESA considerations, and the ESA had no effect on levee construction.

Then there's the time he testified before the Senate Environment Committee that he had suffered untold financial damage because his ranch had been declared critical habitat for the San Joaquin kit fox. An alert reporter determined that this had not, in fact, happened, and Mollie Beattie, former head of the Fish and Wildlife Service, said as much in a public forum. Pombo blinked, saying it "may have been one of his neighbors' ranches". Finally, after having it pointed out to him that no critical habitat had been declared anywhere for the fox at that point, he caved.

In an educated society, Pombo wouldn't be considered much more than a buffoon. It's a truism to refer to politicians as liars. But it's hard to find a clumsier liar than Pombo.

And then there's the celebrated case of Taung-Min Lin, a Kern County farmer who for a time in 1994 became a Wise Use poster boy. Lin, accused of violating the ESA by destroying habitat of the endangered Tipton kangaroo rat and killing five of the rats, was paraded around as a victim of jackbooted Federal environmentalism, a poor immigrant farmer, who only wanted to introduce the United States to the benefits of traditional Asian crops, persecuted for killing critters.

Unfortunately for Pombo and other Wise Users who latched on to Lin as an issue the feds had made every attempt to clue Lin in as to how to farm legally, with minimal hindrance from federal regulations in jackboots or any other footwear. They sent him letters explaining how to obtain inexpensive "incidental take" permits. They visited the farm to provide informal warnings rather than the legally-required citations. Lin repeatedly refused to comply.

When the case finally came to court, Lin was let off with a $5,000 fine, no admission of wrongdoing on his part, and a six month ban from farming - at which point he'd be allowed to kill k-rats to raise edible bamboo, if he got the appropriate permits from the state and feds.

The case of Taung-Min Lin is illustrative, but what it illustrates is just how easy it is to violate the Endangered Species Act and get away with it.

And yet Richard Pombo still, seven years later in a letter to the Tracy Press, holds up the case of Taung-Min Lin , pointing out that "twenty armed federal agents stormed his farm, arrested Mr. Ming-Ling [sic] and confiscated his tractor for allegedly [sic] running over a few Tipton kangaroo rats". Not a word about the months of what amounted to taxpayer-subsidized legal counseling given Lin as he refused to comply with the laws of the land.

I'm not in the habit of giving advice to the GOP. Still, common decency requires that I point out that if Dick Pombo is handed the gavel of the Resources Committee, the Republicans will have made our job quite a bit easier. Having been redistricted into the relatively liberal Tri-Valley area east of Oakland, Pombo is going to have a hard enough time holding on to his seat. Put him in a position where we will be obligated to publicize what he says and does, and he's history. **CP**

Chris Clarke is editor of the excellent Faultline, California's Environmental Magazine, at http://www.faultline.org

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A top clerk at Albertson's supermarket gets $15.63 an hour, plus full health benefits and pension. "Associates" at Wal-Mart make $8 to $10, at Sam's $9 to $12, in both cases with miserable health and pension plans.

twelve states, charging its distribution centers with violating the Americans with Disabilities Act. A sex discrimination suit in California accuses the company with systematically favoring men in pay and promotions, a case that could become a nationwide class action later this year.

National Labor Relations Board trials are either pending, under way or recently completed involving stores in Las Vegas; Kingman, Arizona; Newcastle, Pennsylvania; College Station and Jacksonville, Texas; Pueblo, Colorado; Grafton, West Virginia; Orlando, Florida; Alliance, Ohio; Tahlequah, Oklahoma.

There are two ways to consider that NLRB activity. Clearly the UFCW is galvanizing Wal-Mart workers, creating brushfires for the company across the country; just as clearly Wal-Mart is tying up the union in litigation, inviting unfair labor practice charges as a hedge against actual unionization.

"I don't think there's enough brainpower in all of organized labor combined to figure out how to take on Wal-Mart and win—and I don't mean that with any disrespect", an organizer with one of the more activist unions tells me. Look at its size, he says, its turnover, its popularity, its money. This is a company willing to spend half a million dollars per store to stop an organizing drive, and it has 4,382 stores. "What are its weak points? There must be some, but I don't think anyone knows what those are."

The UFCW isn't straining to publicize its Wal-Mart campaign, which began about five years ago. If, as some union people say, this is guerrilla warfare, then we're at the stage where the rebels are in the hills, making some daring raids to signal their presence but attempting no major offensives. At the AFL-CIO convention in Las Vegas late last year, Wal-Mart employees spoke from the stage as part of a tableau of workers in struggle, but when earlier I'd asked the UFCW pr man about the campaign, he seemed more intent on steering me toward an upcoming ladies' lunch on another, tidier topic. Unions don't favor struggles with no end in sight, and who can blame them? The UFCW has no choice but to go after Wal-Mart, if only to defend the wage and benefit levels it has negotiated with other employers.

In Las Vegas, UFCW Local 711, with about 7,000 members, represents workers at all the big grocery stores in town as well as some at Rite Aide and other retailers. Wal-Mart employs about 4,000 across the city. There's no small-town business left for it to destroy there, but its fourteen stores (including four 220,000-square-foot Super Centers, which sell just about everything) have an obvious advantage over companies that in another context would be considered corporate behemoths. A top clerk at Albertson's supermarket gets $15.63 an hour, plus full health benefits and pension. "Associates" at Wal-Mart make $8 to $10, at Sam's $9 to $12, in both cases with miserable health and pension plans. Against this, what is the competitor's strategy: consolidate, extract concessions or die, all grim prospects for workers.

Roberta West, president of Local 711, and Bill Meyer, of the UFCW International's strategic programs department, say that whenever the union begins recruiting at a Wal-Mart, management pre-emptively increases wages. It was an uptick in wages for new hires at the Sam's Club that prompted Alan Peto to action. He'd been at Sam's for about five years and hadn't so much minded that he'd had to wait 180 days to qualify for health benefits and one year for dental; or that insurance money was withheld from his paycheck the whole time he was waiting and continued to be extracted every payday afterward. He'd not complained about the $350 deductible (which, with the co-pays, discourages 62 percent of Wal-Mart workers from participating in the health plan); or about the cashier production reports that every week were posted to show how many items per hour he'd rung up relative to other cashiers. He always cringed at the Sam's cheer, though never felt impelled to petition against it. But he and other longtime workers did petition over the wage increases, which didn't apply to them.

After a manager interrogated him, he came into work with a tape recorder, was labeled a "disruptive force" and given a "D-Day", the highest level of discipline Wal-Mart metes out short of termination. In line with the company's other infantilizing personnel policies, the manager sent Peto home to "think about what you did" and to write an essay, or "action plan", about why he wanted to come back to work and what he would do to reform. The next day, his penance having been accepted, he checked out unfair labor practices on the Internet and contacted Local 711.

(**Wal-Mart** *continued on page 6)*

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Two years later the NLRB is about to hear their case. In the interim the store's management has used every tool of the unionbuster's dark art: more anti-union videos, compulsory meetings, anti-union literature dominating the break room, an exemplary firing, excess hirings to dilute the union's voting strength, sprouting of an employee Vote No Committee, one-on-one interrogations, stepped up surveillance of pro-union workers for "time theft", even a "Vote No" addition to the Sam's cheer.

In the store's outdoor smoking area one afternoon in December a woman named Betty who works in jewelry was fighting mad about being followed, being timed on break; about strange things happening in her department, a $123 Christ figurine that she found on the floor, a 14K gold bracelet that wound up amid the trash, items turning up with the wrong price tags.

She was mad because, not yet qualified for the insurance she'd been paying toward for ten months, she had to lay out $1,300 for dental work; because managers had confiscated her friend Mona's chewing gum; because anyone on the Vote No Co could call in sick, come in late, chew gum and suffer no consequences; because so much was going on that was just "disgraceful". "We're going to win this thing", she said taking a last deep drag from her cigarette. "Now I better go before they fire me."

Driving away I noticed an ad in a bus shelter for "Radio Free Wal-Mart", 1230 on the AM dial, KLAV. The call-in show, put together by the UFCW, airs every Tuesday night from 6 to 7 Pacific time, and streams over the web via walmartworkerslv.com.

A recent program featured Marty Levitt, the former unionbuster. As far back as the early 1970s, when it was only ten years old, Wal-Mart was formulating its anti-union policy, Levitt said; he was the management consultant, or "what I prefer to call the corporate terrorist". Since then, he said, Wal-Mart has spent "hundreds of millions of dollars exclusively on unionbusting programs". Talk about a long-term strategy.

Back in Vegas, the UFCW's Bill Meyer tells me, "At times I feel like that Chinaman in front of the tank in Tiananmen Square. You know, this may take twenty or thirty years." **CP**

"This is a company willing to spend half a million dollars per store to stop an organizing drive, and it has 4,382 stores."

(**OLS** *continued from page 3)*

If you don't have a car, you are to "walk to the nearest emergency bus pickup point". For example, residents of the city of White Plains would walk to the White Plains High School to wait for buses — meanwhile continuing to "remain Calm".

This is, according to the booklet, "if ... emergency buses serving your area are operating". Among the many assumptions here is that the bus drivers have remained calm and reported for work rather than taking their own cars out of town.

Low-income families would have to walk to a "Reception Area", be organized into groups in order to board buses, and then would have to evacuate in larger vehicles through crowded streets. These Reception Areas would also be where school children are brought, so the scene would include all the parents/grandparents/guardians in the area trying to locate their children as the sirens continue to blow.

According to this plan, families without vehicles would not only be forced to remain in the emergency area longer than higher-income residents but, "walking" to the pick-up point, would necessarily be exposed to radiation and other dangers which a person in a private car (vents and windows closed) would supposedly be avoiding. **CP**

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Destabilization on Venezuela's Menu?

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